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*S. P. E.*  
*TRACT No. XXIX*  
SHAKESPEARE'S  
ENGLISH,

By  
George Gordon



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## SHAKESPEARE'S ENGLISH<sup>1</sup>

IF you had asked an English writer of the sixteenth century what his difficulties were, and in particular why England had been so slow to produce masterpieces since Chaucer, after the usual authors' talk about the scarcity of patrons and the neglect of merit—having cased his mind on this eternal topic—he would almost certainly have named, as the chief obstacle to literature, the embarrassing state of the English language. There was no fixed standard, he would have complained; no accepted grammar, or spelling, or pronunciation, or accent; and, to add to these native troubles, there was an intolerable influxion of new words. That schooling of language which goes on in the places where youth is taught—which tames language but at the same time makes it manageable—all the strength of that discipline was expended on Latin, which was still the language of Europe and the verbal medium of the professions. Latin had its well-tried grammars, its dictionaries, its long-thought-out rules of diction and composition; it had models for everything, and was thoroughly well taught. The modern vernaculars, with the single exception of Italian, were unripe for this status. They could point to few received models, and were growing so fast that neither dictionary nor grammar could keep pace with them. What English a man had depended much more than now on his surroundings and his mother wit, and the schoolmaster was only casually concerned. A boy, of course, might be lucky. It made some difference, I fancy, to young Spenser's English studies to have sat under Richard Mulcaster of the Merchant Taylors' School, and Shakespeare, in his turn, may have been favoured. But Holofernes raises doubts. That Shakespeare was taught grammar, even English grammar of a kind, is plain, and that he took a young man's revenge for it. Holofernes actually thinks in grammar: as a lady approaches, 'a soul feminine saluteth us', he says. He even gets his terms of abuse from it, which seems a stretching of function: 'thou consonant!', he cries, as Moth enrages him. Shakespeare was to do what he liked with English grammar, and drew beauty and power from its

<sup>1</sup> Based on a Lecture delivered at the Royal Institution on 5 February 1926.

imperfections. In the rankness and wildness of the language he found his opportunity, and exploited it royally, sometimes tyrannically. But the complaints which have come down to us from the critics and linguistic reformers of the century are not to be dismissed. Whatever genius might do with it the language needed policing. It was from no eccentricity that Ben Jonson in his old age—*elementarius senex*, as he ruefully remarks, a greybeard among the school-books—laboriously compiled, in the generation after Shakespeare's death, an English grammar. Among his cures for the distempers of his countrymen this ranks as one.

In England, of course, things are never as bad as they seem. Our practice is always so much better than our theory. But the trouble persisted, and was felt, long after the Elizabethan effervescence, not only by grammarians but in the highest walks of literature. So fine an executant as Dryden, in the last years of his life, announced it as a national scandal that we had yet no English prosody, nor 'so much as a tolerable dictionary, or a grammar; so that our language is in a manner barbarous'.<sup>1</sup> Nothing but a government subsidy, he thought, could put the matter through, and what English government would subsidize a committee of writers and grammarians? Addison, Swift, Pope, and their friends were still discussing, in the next century, the Standard English Dictionary of the future, and Addison at one time had even thoughts of supplying it, marking passages in Tillotson for the purpose. But the work was too hard for that group. Thirty years later—fifty years after Dryden's protest—the same complaint can still be heard: our language is without test or standard, said Warburton in 1747, 'for we have neither GRAMMAR nor DICTIONARY, neither Chart nor Compass, to guide us through this wide sea of Words'.<sup>2</sup> Yet the language of that time seems settled enough. It is an odd story, and helps to explain, what used to puzzle me, and may, I suppose, have puzzled others, why Samuel Johnson, when he produced his English Dictionary and Grammar in 1755, became a great man at once. Merit alone will not explain it; there is a history behind that acclamation. He had made, without help either from government or from committees, the book that England had been waiting for and intermittently demanding since the sixteenth century.

<sup>1</sup> *Discourse Concerning Satire: Essays*, ed. Ker, II, 110.

<sup>2</sup> *Preface to his Shakespeare*, p. xxv.

The long chase, it seemed, was over. Our rebel language was caught up at last. Leviathan was hooked.

The linguistic disorder of the sixteenth century was variously felt. It was felt less in prose, the plainer sorts of prose especially, which were protected, as always, by the common sense of daily use. Our historians of literature, in their devotion to a great 'Period', are inclined to suggest that there was both a poetical and a prose revolution in the latter years of Elizabeth. A poetical revolution there certainly was, of a swiftness when it came (though it had been painfully prepared) only twice to be matched in our literature; but in prose, as I read it, nothing nearly so drastic. The improvement, much crossed by individualism and eccentricity, was almost normal. It was poetry, as we should expect, that had suffered most from the want of standards. For though poetry can get along without much grammar or schooling, accent, at least, is fundamental to it. There must be some agreed expectancy of the ear. Now that is precisely what was wanting, and, except in popular song, had been wanting in England for nearly two centuries. The language had moved away from the old poetical forms and phrases. Pronunciation and accent were at open civil war, and the main business of Tudor poetry was to reconcile them. It took two generations to compose that difference, and a third—which was partly Spenser's and partly Shakespeare's generation—to ratify the peace and finger out the new concord. Rhythm conquered its material, and the ear and the tongue re-established correspondence. Yet the victory was not complete, and we are often reminded, as we read the great Elizabethan poets, that the new paradise of sound had been won from chaos.

Another and a more attractive chaos engages our attention: the Elizabethan language and its world of words. I hesitate in these days to praise anarchy in any form, but in the kingdom of language, and even of literature itself, there are worse things. One exhilarating result of the linguistic licence of the century was, in its latter years at any rate, a period of almost complete linguistic freedom. What had at first been an embarrassment became, as wits grew nimbler, the sport of sports. For one long generation the language rioted in the use of all its limbs, and of every prehensile toe and finger. There had never been such a time for the bold employers of words, and there never



will be again. Of course there were usages, and some usages were thought better than others; but they were most of them uncertain, and they were not easily enforced. The good poet, says Richard Puttenham in 1589, will not follow any English that may chance to be in use. He will follow the language which is spoken in the king's court, or in the good towns and cities within the land, rather than the English of the marches and frontiers, or of port towns, or yet of universities, or of the rustic uplandish people, or of mere craftsmen. And this English, moreover, shall be Southern English. Our poet will not take the terms of Northern men, such as they use in talk, 'whether they be noble men, or gentlemen or of their best clarkes, all is a matter': nor in fact any speech used beyond the river of Trent, nor yet 'the far Western man's speech'. But he will take 'the usual speech of the court, and that of London and the shires lying about London, within sixty miles and not much above'.<sup>1</sup>

This, in fact, is roughly what was done, and by dramatic poets like Shakespeare, who wrote for London, must have been done inevitably. But the latitude allowed was still royal. Court English itself was far from uniform. The noblemen and gentlemen of whom Puttenham speaks carried their county about with them on their tongues. Sir Walter Raleigh, the pink of elegance, spoke Devon all his life, as Shakespeare, no doubt, spoke Warwickshire. It was even a matter of pride among some of our patriots that this should be so. 'The copiousness of our language', says one of them, 'appeareth in the diversity of our dialects; for we have court, and we have country English, we have Northern and Southern, gross and ordinary, which differ each from other, not only in the terminations, but also in many words, terms, and phrases, and express the same things in divers sorts, yet all right English alike'.<sup>2</sup> This hearty gospel is as far as possible from the old mistaken theory, which modern philology has destroyed, the theory that a language can and should be fixed; that the first duty of a language is to have a polite usage, and that everything else should be for ever impolite; that a civilized language should be commended, like a fashionable club, rather for its

<sup>1</sup> *The Arte of English Poesie*, bk. III, ch. iv: *Eliz. Crit. Essays*, ed. Gregory Smith, II, 150. The book is anonymous, and the ascription of it to this or another Puttenham is disputed.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Carew, *The Excellency of the English Tongue* (c. 1595): *Eliz. Crit. Essays*, II, 291-2.

power to exclude new-comers than for its willingness to inspect and admit them. The Elizabethans lived before the vogue of this academic theory of language (though one can see it coming), and we, by a similar good fortune, live after its decline. It is a point of community between the Elizabethans and ourselves of which I think we are conscious, and nowhere more warmly than over the language of Shakespeare.

For the first quality of Elizabethan, and therefore of Shakespearian English, is its power of hospitality, its passion for free experiment, its willingness to use every form of verbal wealth, to try anything. They delighted in novelties, and so exultingly that prudent word-fearing men became alarmed. The amusing thing is that even the alarmists are unable to deny themselves the very contraband they denounce; in this matter of language they were all smugglers. Thanks to this generous and unlicensed traffic we discover a quite astonishing number of words, introduced, apparently, by the Elizabethans, which to-day we could not do without. We observe also—what is not without some practical interest for us—the impossibility of predicting, of any new words at any given moment, which of them were going to last.

There are three interesting lists, apologetic or contemptuous, of sixteenth-century innovations to which I should like to refer, more especially as two of them seem partly to have escaped the notice of the *Oxford Dictionary*. Those two we owe to what literary history has never any difficulty in supplying, I mean the quarrels of authors. There is (1) Richard Puttenham's list of words of which he had himself been guilty; (2) Thomas Nash's list culled with loving care from the pages of his antagonist, Gabriel Harvey; (3) Ben Jonson's anthology of the Bad Poet's language in *The Poetaster*.

Puttenham apologizes, in the year 1589, for such liberties as these: *scientific, idiom, method and methodical, function, refine, compendious, prolix, figurative, impression, numerous and numerosity, harmonical and harmonically, penetrate and penetrable, savage, obscure, declination, delineation, and dimension*. He apologizes, and yet makes bold to think that 'strange and unaccustomed' as some of these words may be, they have their uses in the language. Of certain other and more questionable innovations—*audacious* (for 'bold'), *facundity* (for 'eloquence'), *egregious* (for 'great'

or 'notable'), *implete* (for 'replenished'), *compatible* (for 'agreeable in nature')—his defence, he acknowledges, must be less hearty.<sup>1</sup> The author of *The Arte of English Poesie* is a figure of some importance in Elizabethan literature. He had thought about things, and his book was timely and influential. It was read by Shakespeare when it came out, and has been classed, on the evidence of language, among his early favourites or books of reference by that excellent scholar the late Mr. H. C. Hart. A number of the words which Puttenham cites are pre-Elizabethan; it is interesting to find them still open to challenge. But *scientific* and *idiom* are new, like his modern use of *method* and his application of *savage* to human beings. He extended the meaning, also, of *figurative*, *penetrate*, and *penetrable*, and was the first, so far as we know, to use *numerous* and *harmonical* of verse.<sup>2</sup> The vocabulary of Shakespeare shows some coincidence with Puttenham's list. *Function*, *method*, *penetrate*, *penetrable*, *dimension*, and *obscure*, as well as *audacious* and *egregious* (in its better sense), are all employed by Shakespeare, and some of them he treats with marked favour. It is even possible that he took over from Puttenham the new word *Ode*.

I turn to Thomas Nash, who, in the year 1592, cannot moderate his contempt for such upstarts and abnormalities as these:—*conscious* ('conscious mind'), *egregious* (in the laudable sense), *joyial*, *energetical*, *rascality*, *materiality*, *artificiality*, *fantasticality*, *addicted to theory*, *perfunctory discourses*, *amicable terms*, *effectuate*, *novellets*, *notoriety*, *negotiation*, *mechanician*.<sup>3</sup> It is a striking list, from which I conclude that as a lexical prophet Nash was farther from infallibility than Puttenham. Harvey, no doubt, was something of a magpie in his passion for verbal odds and ends; there are other phrases in the list (not quoted here) which deserved their pelting. But he had runs of luck. Of the

<sup>1</sup> *Arte of English Poesie*, bk. III, ch. iv: *Elis. Crit. Essays*, ed. Gregory Smith, II, 151-3.

<sup>2</sup> One of Puttenham's unsuccessful probationers, the word *Politian*, meaning a statesman or public minister, he describes as 'at this day usual in the Court and with all good Secretaries' (*ibid.*, bk. III, ch. iv).

<sup>3</sup> Nash, *Strange Newes* (1592): *Elis. Crit. Essays*, II, 241-2. The expressions are cited from Harvey's *Four Letters* (1592). Of *egregious* Nash asserts that it is 'never used in English but in the extreame ill part'. Yet Marlowe and Shakespeare both use it on occasion like Puttenham and Harvey. Nash's own *carminist* and *carministat*, which Harvey retorts against him, have missed recording in the *Oxford Dictionary*. A *carminist* is a poet, and poetry is the *carminist art*. See *Elis. Crit. Essays*, II, 275.

words cited nearly half seem to have been used by Harvey for the first time. *Artificiality* (by the *Oxford Dictionary* first recorded in Shenstone, 1763); *conscious* (first noted by the same authority in *The Poetaster*, 1601); *energetical* (in the *Oxford Dictionary* post-dated 1603); *extensively* (not noted in the *Dictionary* before 1645, or in Harvey's sense before 1730); *fantasticality* (Nash himself, as Harvey points out, has 'finicality'); these, with *novellets* and *notoriety*, are all, it would appear, Gabriel Harvey's own bantlings.<sup>1</sup> They have lasted a great deal better than Nash foresaw.

Nash and Harvey are vivacious duellists. But the struggles of the new diction are even more vividly displayed in the last scene of Jonson's *Poetaster* (1601), a scene partly founded on the *Lexiphanes* of Lucian. Crispinus, the Bad Poet, who is in fact Marston, is obliged, like Lucian's word-monger, by the rough process of an emetic, to part with the more outrageous portions of his vocabulary. The monstrosities thus disgorged seem many of them now surprisingly innocent: *retrograde*, *reciprocal*, *defunct*, *spurious*, *damp*, *clumsy*, *chilblained*, *clutched*, *strenuous*, *puffy*, *conscious*.<sup>2</sup> (This last, it will be remembered, Nash had already excommunicated). There were other words, of course, more deserving of ridicule.

*Horace.* How now, Crispinus?

*Crisp.* O. — obstupefact.

This monster is one of them, and with *ventositous*, *oblatrant*, *fatuate*, *turgidous*, and *prorump*, may be thought to have fully justified Crispinus's martyrdom.<sup>3</sup> But all alike are rejected, from *retrograde*, the first word, to *obstupefact*, the last. In this particular kind of insight, as a broker in verbal 'expectations' or the futures of words, Ben Jonson, it would appear, was no more gifted than Nash. Yet he

<sup>1</sup> *Negotiation* is earlier; it is first recorded in the *Oxford Dictionary* under 1579. But Harvey was using it by 1580 (*Letter-Book*, 142). Of *jovial* in its modern sense (to be found in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*) Harvey furnishes an earlier example than the Drayton passage (1596) in the *Dictionary*.

<sup>2</sup> *Reciprocal* was a comparatively new word; it is used by Shakespeare in *King Lear*. *Defunct*, also, was favoured by Shakespeare; he has it as a noun and as an adjective, and coined *defunction* and *defunctive* from it. In the *Oxford Dictionary* he is credited with the first use of it as an adjective, but the usage is pre-Shakespearian. *Spurious* was a new-comer, some two or three years old in 1601, as were *strenuous*, *chilblained*, and *puffy*, all fathered by Marston. *Clumsy* has an odd history. It begins to appear, says the *Oxford Dictionary*, about 1600, but is found in none of the Dictionaries or word-books before the eighteenth century. Marston introduced it, and was rewarded as we have seen. It is not in Shakespeare.

<sup>3</sup> None of these words survived.

had given his mind to these things. One of his last public jokes, it may be recalled, turned on a verbal habit of his old enemy Inigo Jones. Jones had two pet words; *conduce* was one, and *feasible* was the other. From this alone it may be seen that Jones was of the class from which we instinctively make chairmen; which angered Ben. In his *Tale of a Tub* (v. ii) the great architect, disguised as Vitruvius the Cooper, uses both the words twice in thirteen lines.

'It would form an interesting essay', says Coleridge, speaking of the *Poetaster* passage, 'or rather series of essays, in a periodical work, were all the attempts to ridicule new phrases brought together, the proportion observed of words ridiculed which have been adopted, and are now common, such as *strenuous*, *conscious*, &c., and a trial made how far any grounds can be detected, so that one might determine beforehand whether a word was invented under the conditions of assimilability to our language or not. This much is certain, that the ridiculers were as often wrong as right; and Shakespeare himself could not prevent the naturalization of *accommodation*, *remuneration*, &c.; or Swift the gross abuse even of the word *idea*.'<sup>1</sup> It is the moral which I have been trying to enforce. I have been collecting for some years the material for such an inquiry, and some of the essays which Coleridge asked for are even drafted. But the grounds of success and failure in the verbal world are hard to find, and, though prolonged comparison does something to disinter them, the quest is still elusive. The Elizabethans made the usual mistakes about innovations, but they might, on the other hand, have made a great many more. They were saved by their executive freedom, their experimental gusto, and by their genuine and widespread feeling for word-creation. The good writer in those days, and especially the good poet, had to be something of an etymologist and more than usually a phonetician, and there is evidence that the best of them took this trouble. The sensitiveness of Shakespeare to the quality, the habits, and the history of the words he plays with is a trained gift.

The new words from the Latin which overflowed into English in the sixteenth century, and more particularly at this time, underwent, of course, some change in the process, but as a rule the least possible. The verbs were simply dealt with, and by a method peculiar to English among the

<sup>1</sup> *Lit. Remains*, II. 273.

modern languages of Europe. They were commonly formed, not, as in French, from the present stem, but from the passive participle. The expression, 'a church *dedicate* to God', which would now be conscious archaism, seemed normal in the sixteenth century, and implied, to an English ear, a verb 'to dedicate'. On this easy model most of the new verbs were made. The nouns, the Graeco-Roman especially, took longer to acclimatize. We can see them coming in, at first as conscious foreigners, *criticus*, *poema*, *epitheton*, *theoria*, Ascham's *idioma*, Sidney's *energia*, Shakespeare's *statua*, *effigies*, and *pyramis*. *Theoria* quickly becomes 'thcory', and *poema* becomes 'poem', taking the place, for this purpose, of the older 'poesy'. The *criticus* of the doctors passes into *critic* in Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*, that playground of the new language, and to show what he is about he gives it twice. In the same piece the solemn *epitheton* of Foxe and Holinshed appears as a Don Armado pomposity, having already begun its progress, through *epithete* and *epithite*, to the modern form. *Idiom*, *energy*, *statue*, *pyramid* all emerge, and the usual stir begins; the more lively of the new-comers collect a family. *Critic* gives birth to *critical* (another of Shakespeare's passing gifts, this time in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), and *energy* starts off with *energical* and *energetical*, which by the middle of the next century have lightened themselves and become *energetic* and *energetic*. Words are in this respect like persons. The more of a household they can assemble, and the more alliances they can make in the country or language of their adoption, the less danger they run of dying out. They make a little clan which holds together. Many single and lonely new-comers perished and left no mark, or lingered obscurely until later revivalism found them out. I think—at random—of Shakespeare's *militarist*, not recorded again before 1860; of *devastate* and *devastation*, never really accepted until the nineteenth century; of *insane* and *insanity*, Elizabethan formations which did not escape Shakespeare, but lay almost idle in the dictionaries for nearly two hundred years.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Effigy* cannot fairly be included among these neglected words, though its freedom came late. Its ancestor *effigies* is first recorded in Shakespeare, and he used it only once. Its fate was peculiar. It came to be used almost exclusively in the plural, or in the phrase *in effigie*, forms doubtfully suspended between English and Latin. Its long quarantine ran out in the Age of Anne; the first example of plain *effigy* which the *Oxford Dictionary* records is in a paper by Steele (1713).

There was much waste, of course, in this word-ferment of the age. There always is when one experiments, and the Elizabethans were experimenters born. The learned Englishmen of the Renaissance, Sir Thomas More and his contemporaries, had deliberately enriched our language from Latin sources, and from that example, in part, the later fecundity derives. But the situation had changed. Luxury had followed want, and the last race of the Elizabethans, secure from verbal poverty, turned self-indulgent. What had once been a necessity had by Shakespeare's time become a game. You tried a thing to see what happened. The process might be fortunate, or it might not. It produced *turgidous*; but it also produced, and by exactly similar means, both *strenuous* and *conscious*. It supplied, from 'domus', as a new word for mansion, the unnecessary *dome*; but this misfortune is amply compensated by such admirable discoveries as *orb* and *event*. It was responsible for *obstupefact*, but by precisely the same method achieved *degenerate* and *defunct*. Even the failures played their part, as in genuine experiment they so often do. The first attempt to secure a new word is always more likely to be a failure than a success, but it holds the ground for the moment and gives a chance of doing better. The important thing, as it seemed to most Elizabethan writers, was to secure the word in *some* form. *Turgidous*, it appears, won't do. Very well. Yet, but for *turgidous*, we might never have had *turgid*, and the language of criticism would have been so much the poorer.

I have always, myself, had a feeling for *prorump*, one of Jonson's rejects. It covers so admirably the whole area of aggressive and precipitate action. 'The meeting prorumped': how much bolder and vividder than 'the meeting broke up' or 'dispersed in disorder'! I could even face the possibility of a substantive *prorumption*; if its form is irregular so is the action which it denotes. 'You have been guilty, sir, of a grave prorumption of duty.' In the Services, I believe, the word would go far. The intrusive -m gives force and body to it, like the 'suetty' b in Lamb's spelling of plum(b)-pudding.

It is in the plays of Shakespeare that the general movement may best be studied. He was, by every sign—indeed the evidence is overwhelming—in the first rank of the advance, and of all its members the most exuberant;

an experimenter always, though in the diction of his time; making his language as he went along. Only the Americans to-day profess to do this. I am concerned for the moment with the simplest part of the business, with vocabulary, and am well aware how much richer and more intricate a subject is his creative handling of phrase and idiom. But we must walk before we run, and though I shall not wholly ignore it, that larger theme must be for other discourses. A book on Shakespeare's language, considered in its whole extent, is badly wanted. I have waited so long for some one else to write it that I have decided to wait no longer, and, incited by Mr. Onions, am now writing it myself. But I must not confound this lecture with the book.

We speak freely of the verbal inventions of Shakespeare, and have excellent reason for doing so. With the *Oxford Dictionary* to guide us, and Mr. Onions's *Glossary*, we even make lists of his inventions. It is an attractive, but, at the best, a conjectural exercise, for colloquial evidence has disappeared, and even the *Oxford Dictionary* is founded on *selective reading*. To say definitely that Shakespeare or any other author invented a word or a phrase is to say, very often, what we cannot know. We are better equipped, it is true, for such inquiries than we have ever been, or than any other nation at the present day; where our ancestors only guessed (where a Frenchman still guesses) we can sometimes risk assertion. But Dr. Johnson's warning holds. 'Authors', he says, 'are often praised for improvement, or blamed for innovation, with very little justice, by those who read few other books of the same age. Addison himself has been so unsuccessful in enumerating the words with which Milton has enriched our language, as perhaps not to have named one of which Milton was the author.' The language of Shakespeare has been more thoroughly registered and more curiously scrutinized than that of any other English writer, and his less considerable predecessors are still imperfectly known. There must be many words and idioms first recorded from his writings which he was not in fact the first to use, however his sanction may have recommended them. Yet when all admissions are made the record for one man is still enormous. Among the expressions first known to us from Shakespeare, because he either coined or introduced them, I note these: *aerial*, *auspicious*, *assassination*, *bare-faced*, *bump*, *castigate*, *clangor*, *compact* (sb.),



*compunctious, conflux, control* (sb.), *countless, critic* and *critical, crop-ear, denote, disgraceful, distrustful, dog-weary, what the dickens, dwindle, dress* (sb.), *ensconce, eventful*,<sup>1</sup> *exposure, fair play, fancy-free, fitful, foppish, foregone conclusion, fretful, gibber*,<sup>2</sup> *gloomy, gnarl* and *gnarled*,<sup>3</sup> *heart-sore* and *heartwhole, herblet, hurry, home-keeping*,<sup>4</sup> *hunch-backed, ill-got* and *ill-starred, illume* and *relume, immediacy, impartial, lack-lustre* (Shakespeare was the first to make free use of this prefix), *lapse* (vb.), *laughable, leap-frog, leer* ('the leer of invitation'), *lonely*,<sup>5</sup> *lower* (vb.), *misplaced, monumental, outfrown* (with many other *outs, out-Herod Herod* among them: this vivid cast of phrase is first illustrated in his works), *pedant* and *pedantic*,<sup>6</sup> *perusal, pre-decease, on purpose, repair* (sb.), *re-word, road* in our sense and *roadway, savagery, seamy* ('the seamy side'), *skimble-skamble, superflux, sprightly*, and *sportive*. Omitted from this list are a great number of words less serviceable to the general language, though with glorious impromptus and choice compounds among them, many of them formations occurring only once, and never meant for circulation. They served, which was all he asked, their immediate purpose of expression.

Much more has been written about the verbal audacity and word-creativity of Shakespeare than about another power of his, more remarkable even than his gift of formal invention—I mean his genius in the manipulation and development of meaning. It is exercised with habitual felicity on the commonest expressions in the language, and is an abstract of that shaping power exerted daily and almost unconsciously by every nation of speakers. The miracle is to see so communal an engine in private hands. Shakespeare possessed this power in a degree never

<sup>1</sup> A Shakespearean coinage, used once, in *As You Like It*, and not heard of again until Johnson included it in his *Dictionary*, citing only this passage. It came into use in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> The *Oxford Dictionary* has no record of the word between *Hamlet* and Cowper's *Odyssey* (1791).

<sup>3</sup> First found in *Measure for Measure* ('gnarled oak'), and not again until the nineteenth century.

<sup>4</sup> The word is in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. No one else seems to have used it until Miss Mitford very appropriately revived it in 1826.

<sup>5</sup> In *Coriolanus*; but Sidney has *loneliness* much earlier. It was taken up by Milton.

<sup>6</sup> Both words are first found in *Love's Labour's Lost*. A generation later English writers were still using the forms *pedanti* and *pedanty* (Ital. *pedante*). *Pedantry* was arrived at in the eighteenth century through *pedanterie*, from Ital. *pedanteria*, which is in Sidney.

approached before or since by any Englishman, or perhaps by any individual mind; he seems, as he employs it, to be doing the work of a whole people.

Let us accept, for the moment, the provisional *data* of the *Oxford Dictionary*, and turn over the results. So far as history can yet tell us, he was the first of our writers to speak of 'cudgelling one's brain', 'falling to blows', 'breathing' a word, and 'breathing' one's last. It is in Shakespeare, on this same testimony, that firearms and debts were possibly first 'discharged', persons 'humoured', letters 'directed', and unkindness 'buried'; there also for the first time men 'bury' their faces in their cloaks. The stirring people of his plays 'drink healths' and 'pledges', say 'done!' to a bargain, 'lay odds' and play 'the ten', 'grovel' or 'hedge', are 'spiritless' and stare on 'vacancy', or 'reel' along the street: all, possibly, for the first time in print. On the same reckoning they were the first public characters to call the world 'dull', to speak of the 'acts' of a play, to find speeches 'flowery' and plain faces 'homely', to be 'fond' of each other, to 'wear their hearts on their sleeves', to have 'balmy slumbers', and lie on the 'lush' grass. No earlier writer is yet known to have spoken of a man's toes 'looking through' his shoes, of the 'makings' of a thing, of an 'abrupt' answer; of 'men of note' and of sending a 'note'; of 'the minute' drawing on; of 'backing' a horse; of things that 'beggared' all description; of 'catching' a person up, or 'catching' a meaning or a cold; of painting from 'the life'; of being 'bright' and cheerful, or of being 'sick' of a thing; of 'sealing' one's lips; of 'returning' thanks, or a present, or an answer; of 'getting' information, or 'getting' an ailment; of 'getting clear' of debt, or of a ship, or 'getting' aboard, or back, or off, or on ('Get on thy boots'). For the first time, also, we have literary authority to call a vehicle a 'conveyance', a ship's crew a 'company', anything that happens an 'event',<sup>1</sup> and a road a 'road'.<sup>2</sup>

It is an endless and, of course, quite speculative theme on which I have embarked, and it has taken me far from my Latinisms. Much that lexicography would seem to ascribe to

<sup>1</sup> Whence his coinage *eventful*.

<sup>2</sup> *Road* in this new sense is first found in *Henry IV*, and was evidently liked by Shakespeare. Its normal meanings were 'roadstead' and 'inroad'. Cotgrave (1611) defines *voleur* as 'a robber, or highway theefe; and an intruder, or a roadmaker'.

Shakespeare in default of other parentage belongs, no doubt, to the colloquial life he knew so well. But he had a genial share in the business, and his contribution is the more impressive because it has merged so easily in the common fund. I should like, if I had time, to show him at work on certain words—such a word as *orb*, which he made his own, and which the poets took over with his enrichments. A simpler example is *accent*. It was a sixteenth-century word, in use in didactic and rhetorical connexions. Shakespeare at first employed it in the ordinary way, but soon began to play upon it; when we speak of a Scotch or an American 'accent' we are enjoying a usage which Shakespeare possibly began. He had a favour for the word, and presently, in a great passage, lifted it bodily from the lecture-room and threw it clear. The first stage of the liberation may be seen in *King John*:

Pardon me,  
That any accent breaking from thy tongue,  
Should scape the true acquaintance of mine ear.

The last is in *Julius Caesar*:

How many Ages hence  
Shall this our lofty Scene be acted over,  
In States unborn, and Accents yet unknown?

It is an interesting question how far Shakespeare's English was coloured by his native dialect, and betrays, or exploits, the speech of Warwickshire. The possibilities have been stated with characteristic judgement by Henry Bradley,<sup>1</sup> but so as almost to inhibit assertion. A London dramatist would normally avoid provincialism, and advices such as Puttenham's would tell him nothing that he did not know. Yet a considerable free trade between the central and southern dialects is implied in that pronouncement, and an existing liberty among writers (however much he might deplore it) of drawing expressions from provincial sources. Rusticities apart, provincialism was hard to fix between Trent and Thames. Puttenham is urgent for a standard and a geographical limitation because the first was unsettled and the second shadowy. The presumption would seem to be that Shakespeare might use a Warwickshire expression if it suited him.

The evidence for Shakespeare's use of dialect has been

<sup>1</sup> In the last chapter of *Shakespeare's England*.

last and best collected in Mr. Onions's *Shakespeare Glossary*. Some of the evidence is remarkable, as Henry Bradley acknowledged, and parts of it have still to be assimilated by Shakespeare's editors. Mr. Onions has restored or justified more than one rejected reading on the evidence of the midland dialects alone.<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare's interest in dialect is limited. He will parody the speech of a neighbouring nation—Scotch, Welsh, or French—in the common manner of the stage, but he seldom reproduces rustic English. He prefers to suggest, with a colouring word or two perhaps, the country homeliness. He had none of Spenser's interest in dialect, and was apparently unmoved by the current theory of the English Ronsardists, who regarded dialect, in our nineteenth-century manner, as a virgin plot or unsifted treasury of poetic language. His nearest approach to this party is in his flower-names, which he fetches, as a rule, from his own country-side.

But here, as in so much else, he is opportunist. He judges a word by what it can do for him, now; and if he wants it he takes it, wherever it comes from. Most of the words he brings from dialect are rather forcible than pretty, and have more pith and village realism than poetry. I think, to give examples, of *aroint*, *ballow*, *bawd* (a hare), *batlet*, *blout*, *bemoil*, *basimecu*, *dowle*, *geck*, *gallow*, *grow to*, *muss*, *mobled*, *minnick*, *mayword*, *potch*, *pother*, *rumion*, *squinky*, *tarre*. *Dwindle* and *drumble* are comelier recruits, and *dwindle* he may be said to have established in literature. There is a notable triplet in *Macbeth*,

dwindle, peak and pine,

of which we owe perhaps two-thirds to Shakespeare and the midlands. All three have lived, and *peak* has been *pine's* partner ever since. He has phrases, also, and epithets, with the telling mark of the people on them—*nook-shotten*, *blood-boltered*, *the be-all and the end-all*, *to burn daylight*: all four first found in Shakespeare, and some at any rate of midland origin. But I approach, and perhaps have passed, the allowed limits of speculation in a region of inquiry where the syllogism hardly runs.

The fertility and happy-go-luckiness of Elizabethan English, and the linguistic vitality of its greatest master, are apparent in a field of language which is sometimes

<sup>1</sup> See his Introduction, p. iv.

overlooked: I mean, in the making of words by derivation. Alongside the importation of new expressions, and the occasional culling of the dialects, there was in progress, like some exuberant and native principle of health, another movement: a revival of derivative word-making, and, as a part of the process, a deliberate resuscitation of some of the oldest creative practices of the language. We have been trained by a line of schoolmasters to handle those significant atoms, the prefix and the suffix, with a certain conservatism and etymological respect. By Shakespeare and his contemporaries, on the other hand, they appear to have been regarded rather as so much loose material, capable of almost infinite combination with the bodies of words.<sup>1</sup> First, the foreigners were set free. The etymological tradition which had confined certain prefixes to words of French or Latin origin was swept aside, and *dis-* and *re-*, for example, with their vast potentialities, were released for general service, and licensed to make native connexions at their employers' will. It became possible not only to *disable*, to *dismiss*, or *disapprove*, but to *distrust*,<sup>2</sup> to *dislike*, or to *dishearten*, and to *rebuild* now seemed as regular as to *re-edify*.<sup>3</sup> A large number of new words were formed in this way; of the numerous words in *dis-* which appear in our dictionaries the majority were made in Shakespeare's lifetime.<sup>4</sup> The French prefix *en-* shared

<sup>1</sup> Certain inhibitions, however, remained. The Elizabethans, for example, felt as we do about the suffixes *-ation* and *-ative*, that their place is with verbs of French or Latin origin. The only exception in *-ative*, as the *Oxford Dictionary* reveals, is the word *talkative*, which somehow stumbled into the language in the fifteenth century. The check on *-ation* was defied in the eighteenth century, when first *flirtation* (1718) and then *starvation* (1778) broke the rule. But they have had few followers, at any rate on this side of the Atlantic.

<sup>2</sup> The *Oxford Dictionary* cites Lydgate, c. 1430, for *distrust*, but seems to regard it as an accident. It is certainly an odd formation at that date.

<sup>3</sup> *Renew* (after L. *renouare*), which occurs in Wyclif, Trevisa, and others, is regarded by the *Oxford Dictionary* as a chance anticipation of later practice. Before the end of the sixteenth century such combinations are rare.

<sup>4</sup> Obadiah Walker asserts, a generation later, that *un-*, *dis-*, and *re-* 'may be prefixed at pleasure' (*Some Instructions concerning the Art of Oratory*, 1659, p. 31). Yet the new words in *dis-* have not lasted well. Many were nonce-formations which in the brave Elizabethan manner served their maker and died: *disbowel* and *disgarboil*, *diseloak* and *dis-rpur*, *dismaiden* and *diswench*, *dislove*, *dislive*, *diswiz*, *diswont*, *disweapen*, *disbishop*, and *dispriest*. There were also *disfriendship*, *diskindness*, *disholy*, and *disworkmanship*, and, luckier than many, *distaste*. Warner fell in love with the trick, and ventured *diskindom*, and, less happily, *disyellow*. Sylvester also, as with every meaneast aid to word-creation. *Dishonour* and *dis-self* came as easy to Sylvester as *rewhelp* and *reyoung*.

the general liberation, and was freely attached to English forms.<sup>1</sup> Sidney's *endear* (which Shakespeare uses), Spenser's *embosom* and *encloud*, Shakespeare's *ensnare*, *ensear*, *enmesh*, *enfreedom*, and *ensky* may be named with *engird*, *embody*, *enkindle*, *enlink*, *enfold*, and *entangle* as typical products of the new licence.

In these, as in most of the novelties and verbal fashions of the time, Shakespeare took his swing. *Dishearten* he may have coined, as he improvised *disbench*, *disedge*, *dispark*, and perhaps *dis-seat*. *Recall* is his, and *respeak* and *reword*; he is soon at home among these simple freedoms.<sup>2</sup> The enfranchised prefix *en-* he is even inclined to overwork, like many a poet since. There is a line in the Folio version of *Othello* (II. i. 70) where the trick goes crazy:

Traitors ensteeped to enclog the guiltless keel.

Both *ensteeped* and *enclog* are words made for the occasion, and never used again.

I said that in the Elizabethan development of this derivative word-making there was an element of revival, and revival of some of the oldest practices of the language. I had in mind among other things (for I must limit my examples) some native English suffixes, long potent in word-making, and potent still, but fallen idle for want of enterprise when the Elizabethans took them up.<sup>3</sup> There was a hunger at that time for adjectives, a poetical craving to describe. Every pattern and mould of epithet was dragged out and inspected, and it was found that some of the oldest patterns were among the best. They were therefore revived, and the affection spreading, as such things do, there was tumbled into the language by one poet or another, from Sackville and Golding to Spenser and Shakespeare, a whole race of new adjectives on the old

<sup>1</sup> This prefix was set free somewhat earlier than the others. It was Skelton, I believe, who first enlarged its range; he made a cult of it. I note, among his performances, *enturf*, *englad*, *ensand*.

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Harvey, with his usual quickness, is among the word-makers here. *Retell* and *requicken*, both used by Shakespeare, are first recorded in his works.

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted, in this matter of suffixes, to the pioneering labours of H. C. Hart, who did so much for the study of Shakespeare's English. See especially his editions of the Three Parts of *Henry VI* in the Arden Shakespeare. Hart was always breaking new ground, but sometimes, as he confessed, labelled his finds a little hastily. His lists and some of his statements need correction.

model. *Heedful* and *heedless*,<sup>1</sup> *gleeful* and *luckless*,<sup>2</sup> *direful*<sup>3</sup> and *hapless*, *sapless*<sup>4</sup> and *senseless*, *cloudless* and *hopeless*, *grateful*<sup>5</sup> and *soulless*, *pleasureless*, *fitful*, *distrustful*, and *fretful*,<sup>6</sup> may stand as not unfavourable specimens of the new mintage, with *finny*, *fleecy*, *bosky*, *briny*, *horsy*, *snaky*, *gloomy*, *dusky*, *shiny*, as a small but impressive handful from the mob of new-comers in -y.<sup>7</sup> It was a notable addition to expressive power, and a timely draft on native resources.

These adjectives are generally regarded by literary students, when they consider them at all, as chance products of a fertile age, and a great many of them, no doubt, were made quite casually. It was easy enough; a man once started could turn them out for ever. Shakespeare made them and forgot them, coining *disgraceful*, for example, at the beginning of his career, and never using it again. But there was more than casual fertility in the matter, and, if I labour this a little, it is because the case is typical. The reason why so many of these adjectives were made was partly, no doubt, because they were needed, but still more because they were fancied: because Golding and Spenser, among others, had deliberately cultivated them, and because Shakespeare and all the other young expression-hunters of the nineties had Golding's *Ovid* and Spenser's poems in their heads.<sup>8</sup> It is amusing to see how smartly they borrow each other's finds; how Golding's

<sup>1</sup> *Heedless*, *hapless*, and *pleasureless* are first found in Golding's *Ovid* (1565-7). This antedates slightly the record of *hapless* in the *Oxford Dictionary*, and alters considerably the history of *pleasureless*, first cited there under the year 1874.

<sup>2</sup> First recorded in Sackville's *Induction* (1563).

<sup>3</sup> *Direful* followed hard on *dire*, another Elizabethan word, and had been overworked by the time of Jonson's *Volpone* (1606).

<sup>4</sup> One of Shakespeare's coinages, used twice in *Henry VI*, and never again. It was taken up by Peele, who was much given to this kind of adjective; he seems, among other exploits, to have been responsible for *cloudless*.

<sup>5</sup> The word *grateful* deserves recording as a courageous Elizabethan attempt to match the irregularly formed *grateful*. It did not survive the century.

<sup>6</sup> The last three adjectives are all Shakespeare's, and the list might be prolonged (by *changeful*, *spleenful*, *countless*, *dateless*, &c.).

<sup>7</sup> Spenser was the chief exponent in this way. He had a liking for these simple adjectives. *Finny*, *briny*, *horsy*, and *shiny* seem all to be his, and he gave his favour to *fleecy*. *Bosky* is first found in Peele, *snaky* in Turberville, and *gloomy* in Shakespeare.

<sup>8</sup> It is hardly realized how large a proportion of the adjectives of these three classes, with their contingent nouns and adverbs, was formed in the Elizabethan period. Of the collaterals of *hard*, for example, *hardful*, *hardfully*, and *hardiness*, *heady*, *headily*, and *headiness*, *heedless* and *heedlessness* are all, apparently, Elizabethan. Many other words would give similar results.

*heedless* and *careless*, for example, reappear inevitably in Spenser and Shakespeare, and Sackville's *luckless* in all three; or how Spenser and Marlowe almost dispute by their nimbleness as connoisseurs the Shakespearian paternity of *gloomy*. For they were collectors as well as inventors, and hunted words and verbal patterns as bibliophiles hunt first editions.<sup>1</sup> I have been tempted even to think that they researched, and dived for specimens in the past, for the older group, at least, was antiquarian. How otherwise explain the resurrection, shall we say, of *careless* and *shapeless*,<sup>2</sup> which disappear from written record for three or four centuries, and reappear simultaneously—in Golding? Or the return of *kindless*, untraced between Orm's *Ormulum* and Peele? Or of *deathful*, unrecorded for three centuries before Sidney? Or of *dewy*, which vanishes after Anglo-Saxon times until the sixteenth century, and is relaunched if not restored by Spenser? The explanation, I suppose, is that these words were re-invented; but that they should have been re-invented, and by this particular group of writers, proves all that need be claimed.

It has been observed that these writers tend to group their verbal fancies, and to give them out in clusters, two or more at a time. It is a weakness of poets, and is a sign either of novelty or of affectation, and frequently of both. Shakespeare succumbed less often than most to this temptation. But I quoted a moment ago a line from one of his maturest tragedies in which he makes public love to a prefix; for a similar attention to a suffix I may cite this passage from perhaps his earliest play:

Weak shoulders, overborne with burthening grief,  
And *pitthless* arms, like to a wither'd vine,  
That droops his *sapless* branches to the ground:  
Yet are these feet, whose *strengthless* stay is numb, . . .  
Swift-winged with desire to get a grave.<sup>3</sup>

Here, in three lines, are three adjectives of the new vogue,

<sup>1</sup> The virtuoso of the business was Sylvester, and his works its rag-bag. Yet ought one to sneer at a poet whom Milton studied, and who coined, perhaps, such words as *deathless*, *star-spangled*, and *prunelung*!

<sup>2</sup> *Careless* is as old as the Cædmonian *Exodus*, but no example is cited by the *Oxford Dictionary* between Layamon's *Brut* (c. 1205) and Lyly's *Euphues* (1579). Golding, however, had it some twelve years before. Of *shapeless* the *Oxford Dictionary* has no record between 1300 and 1587, and the revivalist once more is Golding. He had in fact used it twenty years earlier.

<sup>3</sup> 1 *Henry VI*, II. v. 10-14.



and one of them invented for the occasion.<sup>1</sup> But such wantonness is rare, and he very soon outgrew the grosser weaknesses of the current styles. The run of adjectives in *-y* in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* is iteration of a different sort, and has a special meaning and appropriateness there. *Rusky*, *unheedy*, *sphery*, *brisky*, *barky*, and, in some twenty-eight lines between Oberon and Puck (III. ii. 356-84), the further complement of *starry*, *testy*, *batty*, *wormy*, are drops in that delicate rain of nicely calculated rusticity with which Shakespeare has sprinkled the language of this play. Four of the nine, *sphery*, *brisky*, *batty*, *barky*, he made for the purpose. There is a simplicity about this suffix which pleased the pastoral Spenser, but, like all simplicities, it was easily overdone. Ben Jonson thought Marston clownish with his *clumsy*, *barmy*, *puffy*, 'outlandish terms'. Shakespeare is more tactful, and his fun is gentler. But *brisky* is a joke; *starry* is mated with the archaic and ludicrous 'welkin'; and even *sphery*, though Milton found it here and placed it in the firmament of *Comus*, can hardly by its maker have been intended seriously. It is *Hermia's* 'eyne' that are *sphery*, as it is the 'welkin' that is *starry*, and the adjectives incur some part of the rusticity of their nouns. So in *Antony and Cleopatra*, when he invented *plumpy* for the triumvirs' drunken song, archaic 'eyne' keeps up the note:

Plumpy Bacchus, with pink eyne (II. vii. 120).

There is a place in *Henry V* where Shakespeare may be seen in the very act of experiment, trying a likely formation on his ear. You will find there, in the space of sixty-seven lines, four words, *vaultage*, *rivage*, *sternage*, *portage*, of which all but the second are inventions, struck out to the chosen pattern as he went along. *Rivage* and *sternage* come within four lines of each other in the stirring Chorus to Act III, where he describes the departure of the fleet for France, and *portage* is in the tenth line of the following scene. It is interesting to note that though this

<sup>1</sup> Cp. *Henry VI*, II. vi. 18, 23-25: *luckless* . . . *bootless* . . . *cureless* . . . *merciless*. He had a fancy for *ruthless* at this time; it comes in all the *Henry VI* plays, and five times in the third (*Henry VI*, I. iv. 31, 156; II. i. 61; V. iv. 28, 36). Hart asserts that the three adjectives above are new; but *pithless* and *strengthless* are pre-Shakespearian. Shakespeare was well enough satisfied with *sapless* to repeat it in IV. v. 4 of the same play, and he has *strengthless* again in *Henry VI*, *Lucresia*, and *Penns and Adonis*: all early works.

scene is on land Shakespeare's mind still lingers with the Chorus and the English shipping in the Channel, and the eyes of the resolute English infantry are conceived as peering from their heads like braces of cannon in a ship's ports. The image and the form together might seem to warrant the suggestion that the forty-five lines from the beginning of Act III were written at a sitting.

This quick and eager play with the bodily elements of words is a characteristic of all his work. In no detail of his language is there fixity; its forms and even its senses are in transition to the end. In his later writing, when his language is outraced by thought, he risks all for meaning, and rather than be stopped or impeded in his course dares everything that the flux of forms made possible. Few of the class of words thus hurled on paper—his *actures*, and *embracures*, and *insistures*, his *sortances* and *sonances*—have lasted well, or, indeed, outside his works, deserved to last. But he would not have minded. He made them for his own use, and they served and (since we study him) still serve his turn. The success of his experiments in language is to be tested artistically, as we criticize the furnishing of a room or the hanging of a picture. The question is not, Does this suit universally and for ever? but Does it suit here and now, in the identical situation in which we find it? The life of Shakespeare's verbal experiments is often limited to their birthplace, but as often, it may be supposed, their creator contemplated no other life for them. This is how we should all like to make our language, quite freshly, just as it is wanted. Shakespeare comes nearer to that ideal than any other writer, perhaps, who ever lived.

I had hoped, in this paper, to say something about the recovered facility in word-compounding which distinguished the writers of the Elizabethan age, which deformed their prose as much as it adorned their poetry, and which led Shakespeare to his 'proud-pied April' and his 'heaven-kissing hill'. But it is a subject too capacious to be dealt with in asides, nor is it now to be handled in a postscript. I preferred, when it came to the point, to discuss the humbler method of derivation, because it is so often ignored. As to the Latinizing with which I began, an opportunity may perhaps be given me, in some future Tract,

to pursue the literary and colloquial fortunes of that invasion, as it surged above and below stairs: not only in the upper world of rhetoric and poetry, but in that underworld of the Latinist movement of which Dogberry is at once the saint and martyr.

GEORGE GORDON.

